

PARENTING ON CUE

with **Queenie Tan**



POC 133 : Interview with Annabel : the 3 fundamental principles for rising the whole child

Queenie: Everyone, I would like you to meet Annabel. And I've just spent like the last half an hour chatting with her. She's absolutely brilliant. Hi Annabel!

Annabel: Thank you. Hi. It's wonderful being here.

Q: I was so looking forward to this for like almost two months. Because of the corona and things getting a bit wonky, and needing to adjust. But I have been, I hate to say this, stalking you on Facebook, and on social media. I mean checking out all the cool stuff that you post. For those of you who don't know. Annabel is the owner of Thriving Minds. And she has amazing stuff. I don't want to say that the toys... because it seems too cheapen the stuff that she's doing. I would say that they're more educational resources. But yes, they are amazingly beautiful because they're so natural. They don't have overstimulating colors. At first, when I looked at her stuff, I'm like "no way she must be Reggio Emilia trained or Waldorf trained or Montessori trained" because her stuff is so natural. And it looks beautiful when I look at the pictures, and I can just imagine, if I had a classroom of students I can imagine them just really going into it, and really interacting with these stuff. So tell Annabel, why did you decide to go into this? The education industry is really saturated with resources. So why did you decide to create something different?

A: I'm an early childhood teacher-trained. But I've worked more in daycare environments with the kinder age, which is a lot different from the school kinder environments in Australia. And I've been exposed to a little bit of Montessori, Reggio and Waldorf through teaching and being in those environments. But the way my business started was actually wanting to inform parents, because I saw a lot of parents at daycares were asking me "what should I be doing with my my child?" "How can I be supporting their education at home as well?" And so I thought there's got to be a way in which I can reach more parents than I would teaching, reaching a wider audience, to educate them on a wider scale about different ways and different activities and items that you can use to educate your child. So I actually started teaching parent-child classes so there were more sort of play groups, and approaching it that way, and then I'd introduced sort of resources into that, into the groups. But the parents, it was hard to get people to commit to a 10-week program. So then the resources was an easier way to, again, reach the parents. So I know it is an oversaturated market, and it's getting more and more oversaturated. But I try and approach it as more learning tools, and then giving parents more of an idea what to do with them.

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Q: So how do you think your material stand out? How are they different from what most other people are offering?

A: I'm into the natural, the words, the felt, products mainly, and then I also do a lot of books. They're all to benefit early childhood development in different ways. And I know from my own research and working with children that natural products are better. So I try and stay away from the plastic, as much as I can. It's hard not to a hundred percent be away from plastic, but I do try the more natural as well. And it's actually healthier. The natural products are healthier for children, in the sense of shared communal usage, as well. So I know a perception that we think plastic we can clean it, put it in the dishwasher or something like that, and you can do it. But often it harbors more germs inside, as well. Only when you unscrew the screws and open them up, you realize "it's not clean; it's actually harboring all of these things." So my point of difference is educating the parents why natural is better, and what they can do with the items so they're more open-ended, as well. They don't have noises, they don't have batteries. So it's getting children having to use their imagination with the toys, which is much better. So you have one toy but you can do 20 different things with it. And through my Instagram page and Facebook, I try and show different ways and different activities that you can use the items as well.

Q: I've been following you very closely because it's really, the thing about your educational materials stand out to me is that they are so open-ended. It really allows the child to work with it in different ways, and in many different ways. And this is so different from a lot of other things where it is usually very singular in its objective like this is for teaching math, and this is for teaching language, and that's it, and you just press this, and press that and listen to the audio, and that's it. But yours, it allows so much space for creativity and for imagination like I was looking at your- I think it was coloring set. And I was like "oh my god, that is so Waldorf." It's like I can imagine this set outdoors. Under a tree on a wooden table, and the child can just sit there and create and be inspired, the whole set just blends in with nature. It doesn't stand out like a sore thumb, like most other things, you can put outside, fix out, like look outside my garden right now, it's a big yellow truck in the center, which is fine. You can put one or two items like that, if everything is like that, that looks kind of ___.

A: It's a sensory overload as well when an environment is jampacked, full of different colors and materials.

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Q: But I think even in our nature, it's colorful but it's very nature-tinted, very natural colors, not very bright luminous colors in your face, which I think a lot of toys are. So a lot of your items are made of really soft materials and textile. I notice quite a lot of textile like for transferring. And I also notice a lot of wooden items as well. I think a lot of it isn't colored, even colored. So it's very natural wood colors, and it's just amazing when I look at it like. My eyes feel so relaxed, and I can imagine all the different things that children can get up to with them, especially the blocks and the rings.

A: A lot of felt items, like felt balls things like that. And I'm big on there's no right or wrong way to use it, as well because so much in life you learn "oh you're doing it wrong." That's not right. All they're hearing is no no no all day long, sometimes eggs. And to be give your child a set of items, and you can say there is no right or wrong way to use them, use your imagination, go wild is such a beautiful thing. You're not going to get all the children do the one same outcome, you're not going to get the one same outcome out of all of them with the materials, and that's what you want. You don't want children to learn that I need to fit in this box because that's the only way that I can be, if I fit and I don't do. I've got to do everything right, and give the correct answers and all of that. It's not about that. We want our children to be able to, grow and develop their imagination because we don't know what's going to happen in the future, robots are going to be probably taking over all of those monotonous...

Q: Not they're already, they already are. I saw ubers that are driverless. So most people become uber drivers because whatever job that they're doing isn't working anyway, and now we're taking that from them.

A:.. yeah difference between humans and robots, imagination and creativity. It's a big thing we want to promote to our children...

Q: It's so sad because it's really huge in Asia where you have to get it right, you can't get it wrong. So I think it puts a lot of unnecessary anxiety and stress on our children at a very early age. I mean, this is the age where they should be creating, they should be imagining, they should be lost in their world of getting excited about the smallest ant that they see, and the smallest crack on the ground. But in Asia, we sort of have lost that, I think, I'm not sure we even ever had that. I think we have more of that when I was younger but as the generations unfold, it's more and more academic pressure, and also over stimulation from the environment, with all the bright

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colors, and all the synthetics and plastics and stuff like. And it really I think it just really sucks the life out of our children, which is, it's really sad. And that's why of all the different educational materials and toys out there, when I see it I'm like, okay right, that's just another piece of plastic. But when I see your stuff, I'm like "oh my god, that is amazing." It even looks so relaxing for my eyes to look at a picture of your stuff, let alone touch it and manipulate it, and work with it and explore it. I mean who are the people who would buy, who buy your stuff? Like what age are their children usually?

A: The main age that I say is probably the two to four-year-olds. So their parents, their grandparents, uncles, educators who are in the early childhood sector, quite a lot of kindergarten teachers, so that's pretty much four, five-year-olds, that age. And also I've had speech pathologists and child psychologists purchase quite a few of my sensory items and mindfulness books because I'm all about as well products being about the whole child, rather than just academic or just focusing on that. I do try and have a lot of products that cover all areas of development, as well as the mind, because mental health is a huge issue.

Q: Yes it is. And I think when we were having a chat prior to this recording, you mentioned that you work with children with learning differences and special needs. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

A: So I'm currently working in a day care environment with four and five-year-olds. But I mainly help one girl who is four who has, quite a severe disability, which includes all areas of her development, physically, as well as, she's non-verbal. And so, we communicate in other ways, key word signing, which is a bit like sign language. So that has taught me the power of open-ended materials as well, and also getting outside, and I absolutely love that role, working in that environment. It has been the best teaching role I've ever done. So I love doing that side as well, as well as the business. Yes, I do that a part-time. And there are all sorts of children, some who also go to school kindy environments, which are a lot more structured than the day care kindy in the environment that we run, we spend a lot more time outside than most places as well, and it's all about the day care feeling like home and natural. There's a lot of wood in that environment, and we focus a lot on primary care giving. So we do really look at attachment with the children.

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Q: That is a really good point. I remember that you told me that you also struggle with this learning difference as well.

A: Yeah I have a learning disability. So I have auditory processing disorder, which you could speculate how does that come around, it could be genetic. They do think it's quite environmental as I had constant ear infections when I was a baby and young child, and that delayed my speech. I had glue ear. I wasn't hearing words and sounds correctly. So that has affected the way my brain has been wired to understand speech and language and comprehension as well. And school was pretty tough, and university as well. I encountered a lot of teachers who were ignorant and totally misunderstood what my learning disability was. I had some who'd never heard of it before. I had a mentor teacher tell me that I should have told her sooner because then, she would have treated me differently.

A: Wow, how do you feel about that?

Q: That felt like a real stab in the back. I don't think I said anything. I was just in a state of shock and disbelief that she had actually said that to me, and as a 20 year old. I was... you know, still learning about yourself, and it really hurt because it's like, I'm not different, like I'm different but I don't want to be treated like I'm stupid. I just live in a different way. But who doesn't? We all learn in a different way, we don't serve me the same way so "how am i different?" I've had a few teachers like that who just totally didn't understand but I've had, as well, fantastic teachers who... that's why I went into teaching because they made such a difference in my life, and totally understood that, "okay, you've got something called auditory processing disorder, so what? Let's give you the tools that you need to help you get through this. And they were determined to help me. They didn't feel burdened. A lot of teachers feel burdened with these learning disabilities, and that's not... I think it's just because we don't know enough.

Q: I don't think it's that. It's nice because listening to you, saying this, I realize now why I am so attracted to your stuff because our stories are so similar. I had the same issue as well, and being dyslexic and all, school was hard but I have got really good teachers but I mean bless them. They don't have any clue how to do with children who have learning difference. And so like... I've been wearing glasses since I was seven, and it's not because I have a problem with my eyes. I went to school at seven. I was dyslexic. I couldn't read, and couldn't figure out how the coding works. And so they taught I had an eyesight issue. So I told my mom to put me on glasses, and I have been

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dependent on glasses ever since. And I'm like this has been such a big part of my image that it's not even supposed to be but because of the teachers not being informed enough. That causes that, and I think that's the reason why I love your educational materials because they're not specific to a certain learning style. It is completely neutral, and the child can figure out what the learning style is and use whatever learning style they have to make it work, which is amazing because everybody else out there, they develop things that are very specific to a certain learning style. And if you don't have it, and you will struggle with it. And then you be brand it as something else. So that's amazing to hear this side of your story. And I think we need more people like us.

A: Of course.

Q: To create stuff for children and to help parents see that it's okay to be different, and it's okay to celebrate diversity in our learning styles, and what we can and cannot do. And it's absolutely fine. And I think being conformist is a bit overrated.

A: They want to conform. That's how it is today. We need to embrace everyone's beauty and differences because otherwise, what have you got? Everyone the same would be a really boring world, we'd all be in one profession. We need to find people's interests and learning styles, and use it to their advantage rather than always trying to push them. "No, there's only this one way to learn, and you can't do it, your label as this." Then the love of learning, it's like watching a light goes out. And already at four, they already hate school. They don't want to go because they've been told already "that's wrong" "stop" "no" "you don't do it like that." And I think life is about learning every day. I'm learning new things about the world and about myself. And I love it. I think, I noticed it's been challenging, and I have been told that's wrong and things like that but I've had the resilience, and the support, and the determination to keep on going, and the wanting to pass the love of learning on to the next generation, and to help parents understand how to help their children as well.

Q: And I think that's why the work that you do is so important because at the end of the day, it boils down to the parents making decisions they are the legal guardians of their children, they make decisions for the children, and if we can help them see things differently, then they might make more informed decisions but I think you're right about diversity and about uniqueness because I have... Everyone looks different, like everyone has different grains and different shade, and different color comes from a different tree. Everything around us is so different and

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diverse. You know when you go to IKEA everything looks the same, all the tables look the same, the chairs look the same. I think that, yeah I mean that has its place but when we live in a world where everything is manufactured to be the same, we kind of lose sight of the fact that our children are not all the same. They don't learn the same way. They don't take instructions the same way. They don't have the same talents. They don't read the same way. They don't understand things the same way. And we just have to give them opportunities to figure out things for themselves using the way that they are comfortable with. And I think a lot of times parents feel like we have to teach our children that we forget that our children can teach themselves, and they're the best teachers because they know how they learn. And we don't learn the way they do. So when we teach them, we tend to impose our learning style on them. And that puts a lot of pressure on them because they be thinking "wait a minute, I'm supposed to do it that way but that doesn't feel right to me, I need to do it this other way, but it looks like the other way is wrong because Mom's way should be right, right?" So it puts a lot of pressure on the child. And that's a whole new topic discussion all together. That's why I'm such a big fan of what you do because all your materials celebrate open-ended learning. And every child can have a go at it, special needs or not, learning difficulty or not. And it's really nice to see that because I mean like a lot of commercial stuff that I look at, it's only for a specific type of children, very specific age group, very specific learning style, and it has very specific objectives. So like even learning addition, you need to have some understanding prior to that before you can work with. But the material but yours is like totally open-ended, and it could be... the the level of difficulty can vary because children are able to challenge themselves more every time. That's just what they do. So we just have to give them materials that will allow them and empower them to do just that.

A: They are great teachers on their own. And they can show you where they want to go in their learning as well. Around the world, And I think we often, "Oh, you're four, you should be reading" or "you should be at this level", you should be doing this. But actually, go back to what they're interested in. So if it's dinosaurs, or they're interested in ballet, why hinder that? Because you think they should be reading at four, writing the name at three. Follow their interest and then they will learn the other things when they're ready. I think there's pressure in the society to teach our children academically as well. I think that's common in the world. I'm definitely finding that in Australia, and that way as well with this pressure, children, there are more reported mental health issues in younger children because of parents and schools and our feelings. And parents are feeling this pressure to push their children more than they are necessarily ready for.

Q: I think Australia has come a full circle because when I was studying back in 2000, I think. The reason why I chose to study in an Australian university because it seems to me at that time that

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Australia was very much into play-based education, and inquiry-based learning. That's why we loved it and I was totally immersed in that. I think it was the shift in the education industry or system where it became more academic gradually, and then, I think now, a lot of people in Australia, my friends and my colleagues are trying to change it back to being as play-based as possible. And it's really promising to see that. People like you who are championing a switch-back to how it used to be because, we would see a push down method, how you are introducing academics to children too early, we face a lot of mental health issues, and that gets carried on until they grew up. And it's counterproductive if they hate going to school, if they hate learning. There's so much anxiety around learning, which shouldn't be the case. It should be fun. It should be something that we look forward to doing on a daily basis. But I think in Asia, we're still not coming out of the band yet. We're still into the "push push push push push" culture. It's amazing if I can see parents I know that there's a small group of people who are trying to protect the children from this. And they're trying to save or preserve the children's childhood, but it's a very small percentage. Still, if you're listening to this and you're trying your best to not to succumb to the pressure of giving at your own academics too early or you're sending them to 400 different tuition centres, then give yourself a pat on the back because this is something that Annabel and I feel very strongly about, that we need to look into children's mental health and to most importantly, during the earliest to develop the love for learning. It should not be forced or coerced. And the whole mental health issue is so bad in Asia because children want to do well to please their parents. It's like they have to earn their parents' love, which is kind of strange because you think that our parents... we should grow up thinking that our parents love us unconditionally, no matter what color shape and form we come in. But in Asia, a lot of our children feel like they have to earn it, which is... And I think it's not just this generation, it is intergenerational. It has passed down generation from generation. So even parents today, they expect their children to earn their love and affection, which is really sad. Underlying, there's too many factors that are affecting children's mental health but we could start by really taking them a bit more outdoors, and definitely trying to give them some quality time to work with things that are a little bit more natural, that are more open-ended that will allow them to vary how much they want to stimulate themselves. I think that is so important, that children are given back some control over their playtime.

A: And it's not just... I think it's because that's the way it should be. I've researched to find what are the best ways in which to educate in the early learning years. And the research, it's all the natural based learning, letting the children have control over their learning as well, and interest and inquiry based learning. I love the natural approach but the research is all showing that it's the better way to go for so many reasons, as well. So why are we not listening to the research.

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Q: It's kind of strange that we need research to tell us these things. I feel like the money could be better spent doing something else because... I mean, I'm a huge research fan, but I feel like some things are so fundamental that parents need research to tell them what to do. If we just sit and observe children, like observe them when they are least stressed, what are they doing, what are they interacting when they least stress? And that will give us some indication of what works and what doesn't. And I think, a lot of times, the fundamental problem is that parents don't even know what makes them stressed. They can't identify with their children. I've also worked with parent who say things like "stress is part of our everyday life, children need stress, they have to get used to it." I'm like "No. They will have to deal with it when they're slightly older". Why force them to do it now when they should be really learning in developmentally appropriate ways which is manipulating stuff. Your items are all hands on, so hands on, they are much room to manipulate, to touch, to feel and to experiment with it, to trial and error, to create stuff. It's amazing because it allows children to work within what is developmentally appropriate for them.

A: The best way for them to learn, at the different age, their developmental stages as well. So again, that's why they are so hands-on because children learn best through doing and experiencing and manipulating, just like you said. And so many things are sensory as well, so they've got different textures or visually as well. If you think about how babies learn, they're learning through their senses. That's how you begin learning in life, through all your senses. And if we are just giving them worksheets so early, it's neglecting. They then have all this sort of pent-up energy because they haven't been able to learn naturally. If we think about when we go to a meeting that goes an hour long or something, and we're sitting at a desk the whole time for an hour concentrating on a PowerPoint or something, it's hard work. It is extremely hard. Yet we're expecting four and five-year-olds should be sitting at a desk often for three hours in a day, five days a week. It's crazy, it's not the best way for them to be learning. They need to be moving and doing in all these different ways. That's why I try and cater to what is best for them.

Q: I've been meaning to ask you this, I love the selection of your books. How do you pick them? Like I'm trying to see if there's a common theme in there, but I noticed that a lot of it, it's not like "once upon a time, in the land far far away.."

A: I had some fairytale books before, they're traditional fairy tales but that's more if I have the resources to go with the book. So I might have Little Red Riding Hood. I might have the finger

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puppets then I might have the book. But I try and stay away generally from that. And I've got a lot of books that deal with feelings.

Q: I love that. I noticed that.

A: Mindfulness, yoga, the power of reading.

Q: A lot about diversity as well, isn't it?

A: Yes, diversity, inclusion, real life experiences rather than abstract.

Q: Fiction...

A: Fiction, there's nothing wrong with that. I know from personal experience it's hard to find books about reality, in real life, feelings, and circumstances that they can relate to, as well. So I'm always... probably every day I'm looking out for new and different.

Q: I love your selection. I think you can tell what a person is by the books that they read, or the books that they promote. I look at this selection and I thought oh my god that's amazing. It's so hard to get books about feelings. And that is something that parents find really hard to have conversations with the children about. So reading it in a book would definitely be a lot easier to insert into a conversation. So that that's amazing stuff.

A: Books are such a great way to introduce a topic or something that you want to discuss. You can get so many conversations or extensions of learning from one book because then you can go on to research feelings or do activities on feeling, things like that. But I know a lot of feeling books that are out there are very basic, like they might just tell you. "I woke up I'm happy", "I'm going to bed, I'm sleeping". But you sort of need that next level. When they're four, I found that there was sort of this disconnect. I struggled to find books that went into feelings in a developmentally

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appropriate way, as well. But I found some really good ones recently that I do stock at the moment that they're just amazing, so happy that I found them. I take them to daycare as well, and read them to the children and say what they think. I've also got quite a lot of books about environmental responsibility. Again, they're hard to find as well those sort of books but so important to be educating our children about taking care of the environment.

Q: Because everything is changing now, isn't it? I mean like everything is changing and people are creating new stuff. It's like, the other day a friend of mine told me that she bought a microfiber cleaning cloth. So she's like "you should totally get it, it's really good clean stuff, and you don't need to use soap, you just use it with water." And I'm like, "Do you know what microfibers are made of?" And she's like "it's cloth, it's cotton." I'm like "no, it's made of plastic, and every time you rinse it microplastic goes into the reverse. And she's like "what?" And I'm like "yes."

I didn't know this. I found out earlier this year. Microfiber, cloth and textile has been around for at least I think 10 years now, I've only just found out. So everything is constantly changing and these are things that we can definitely learn along with our children so that we can all make informed choices about everything, keeping our environment intact is one of them

A: The future is for them. And it's about educating yeah again and informing them so they can make their own decisions, and understand why are we recycling at home?, or why do we have a compost bin at home?, what is the point in just one person doing it?. That's the power of one person can make a difference. And children often feel empowered, and it helps if they are feeling anxious "those poor fish eating the microplastics, I'm feeling anxious about that." If we can empower them, and provide them with the opportunity to make a difference, do something about it. It does help their anxiety and their worries.

Q: I think I am just becoming a really huge fan of yours now because I am so huge on educating the whole child, not just so that they can go to school and do well in school, but it so that they can grow up to be adults who can make responsible decisions for themselves, for the environment, and for taking care of their mental health. This is such a huge topic. And not many people can see it that way. Not many can see the whole big picture that way. And it's amazing for me to have this conversation with you because I feel like I am in my own... I'm in company with people like me. It's absolutely amazing

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A: What is the point if you read but you don't have any friendships, and if you feel lonely, and depressed. We need to be looking at the whole picture, the whole person and often, we forget that we are a whole person and we have different things we need to look at rather than just the academics because it isn't just about getting a good score in school will make you happy or make you feel fulfilled in your life. that is a small percentage and I know it can get pretty stressful. yeah especially with Covid, schools are being shut down and people are feeling like "oh my gosh but they're going to miss out on so much. They're going to be behind." Imagine how much they've learned through this experience spending more time at home probably cooking more, going outside. We need to think of it as how much they probably gained through this experience rather than what the detrimental impacts have been.

Q: Yeah, but you know what, Annabel, I think you have hit the nail in the head like you have brought up a few very important points. Which I think are the most important things that we need to look into. Dealing with children about sustainability, because we have to take care of the environment they've been living in, about diversity because we're all different and about mental health. Like seriously these are the three most important things that we would need to raise a whole person. It's amazing and it's absolutely refreshing to hear you say that. And your points of view about this and how we can start fostering that we need a home environment with really young children. And yeah, I was just today I thought that we would just have a chat about your stuff but you have taught us here so much more about the really important things about raising children.

A: You learn something.

Q: I have, I suddenly have. I think I started off as a teacher with all these amazing idealistic views in mind. But eventually, after doing this for 20 years I've got sucked into a lot of struggles that the parents have about their own mental health issues and the anxieties that they face with changing times and stuff like that and I and a lot of bits about how we can prepare our children for school, how we can prepare them to do with this changing times. It's good to be reminded that there are certain things that are just super-duper important above everything. Yeah, it's amazing having you here on the show. Thank you for popping by and for talking about yourself as a learner and how you want to help other learners and help parents of the learners help the learners.

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A: It's been a pleasure, thank you. I've really loved chatting to you and I think we are very like-minded in how we feel on the importance of early childhood development, as well and the importance of the home learning environment, as well and remembering the children as a whole. And trying to live in the moment rather than always thinking about the future, which is hard, especially at the moment when we don't have control, we do worry more about the future, as well. But it's been wonderful talking to you and I hope the listeners out there feel that like they've learned quite a bit from listening at this podcast and hopefully not feeling too overwhelmed, good place to start.

Q: I know, what I'm gonna do guys is I'm gonna put all the links in the show notes so that you can go find Annabel on social media. And she's got some seriously amazing stuff and I mean like just listening to her philosophy and what she wants, what she values in early childhood education, so much of that can be seen in the stuff that she carries. The things that she brings into the environment, the books that she has, it's just absolutely amazing stuff. So yeah, definitely go check her out. I'm stalking her I'm happy for more paper

A: I'm happy with more people stalk me.

Q: That's the best part about social media it allows us to stalk each other halfway across the planet, right?

A: It's bizarre, but it's amazing.

Q: Yeah, but I mean I I just find your stuff really inspirational. Like, it's not photoshopped or anything, but the stuff that you have is just so inspirational and it keeps on reminding me to go back to basics. Like. to really go back to basics about what children fundamentally need to grow and learn and it's amazing. And as much as I advocate for that, I tend to get sucked into, because I work with adults, I get sucked into adult problems. So, it's so nice to be reminded again of how we can really help our children preserve childhood. I totally appreciate you for doing that. Thank you, Annabel.

A: Oh you're welcome. Thank you very much Queenie.